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Letter from the Prelate (May 2007)

Selections from a letter on Marian devotion and the family, from Bishop Javier Echevarría to the faithful of the Prelature of Opus Dei.

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Throughout the Easter season, the readings at Mass present us with scenes taken from the Acts of the Apostles. It is a source of great joy to see how from the beginning, right from the day of Pentecost, the first faithful had the clear awareness of

constituting the new family of God on earth, founded on Christ's paschal sacrifice and on the effusion of the Holy Spirit. Let us be filled with joy and responsibility, since we, each one of us, are the Church, which is ever young.

St. Luke tells us that those first brothers and sisters of ours in the faith “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”[1] And, he adds: “the company of those that believed were of one heart and soul.”[2]

An immediate consequence of knowing and feeling themselves to be God's family was apostolic daring, the courage to speak about Jesus to the persons they met, without fear or human respects. “They spoke the word of God with boldness,” notes the evangelist. And he emphasizes: “with great power the apostles gave

their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.”[3]

Underlying this marvelous picture, which highlights the first Christians’ logical enthusiasm for the risen Jesus and their apostolic zeal, one can make out, as I already said, the awareness of being God’s family on earth. It is the family, united by bonds much stronger than those of blood, that our Lord had proclaimed in his preaching: “Here are my mother and my brethren! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister, and mother.”[4]

Jesus’ words refer first of all to our Lady, for thanks to Mary’s full adherence to what the Archangel had announced to her on God’s behalf, the great mystery of the incarnation of the Word took place. The first Christians learned from our Lady to

conduct themselves as God's children, as brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ.

Some Fathers of the Church emphasize Mary's indispensable role as Mother in the early Church, after Jesus' ascension to heaven and the coming of the Paraclete. For example, in a book attributed to St. Maximus the Confessor, we read that "when the apostles dispersed throughout the whole world, the holy Mother of Christ, as Queen of all mankind, dwelt at the center of the world, in Jerusalem, in Sion, with the beloved apostle whom Christ the Lord had given to her as her son."[5]

These considerations are very timely for the month of May, especially dedicated, in a great part of the world, to our Lady. Fulfilling the mission her Son entrusted to her on the Cross, Mary conducts herself at every moment as the Mother of

Christians, as the Mother of the Church. I invite you to consider St. Josemaría's joy when, at the beginning of this month, he points out that "devotion to our Lady...is always alive, awakening in Christians a supernatural desire to act as *domestici Dei*, as members of God's household (Eph 2:19)."[6]

I would dare to say that St. Josemaría was an innovator or, if you prefer, a saint who drew out immense riches and insights from Sacred Scripture. He used to stress that a Christian—and specifically, a man or woman of Opus Dei—makes the street into a temple, by turning one's occupations into worship and praise of the Blessed Trinity. And I find in those words of the homily I just cited something very characteristic of him, which many people have commented on: in his human dealings and conversations, St. Josemaría converted the many different places

where he happened to be into another Bethany. When with the sick, with manual workers, with students, with intellectuals, etc. (and I could point to many specific cases), he created a family atmosphere, teaching everyone how to receive Christ, as did Martha, Mary and Lazarus.

It is only natural that each one, in light of his or her particular needs, should make a specific plan for ways to deal personally with our Lady in the upcoming weeks, with the desire to see those around us as brothers and sisters, at every moment.

Perhaps we can put more attention and affection into our daily praying of the Rosary and the contemplation of the mysteries; or undertake a pilgrimage, accompanied perhaps by another person, to a shrine or chapel dedicated to our Lady in the city where we live or in the surrounding area.

In Opus Dei during this month we live the custom of the “May pilgrimage,” begun by our founder in 1935. Let us entrust its spiritual fruit into our Mother’s hands. For as St. Josemaría said, “Mary continually builds the Church and keeps it together. It is difficult to have devotion to our Lady and not feel closer to the other members of the Mystical Body and more united to its visible head, the Pope.”[7]

The consideration of the Church as God’s family also brings to mind the need to spread the truth about the family, founded on the marriage “of one man and one woman, forever.” As the Pope said in Valencia a little less than a year ago, “the family is the privileged setting where every person learns to give and receive love.”[8] We can never do enough to spread the Church’s teaching on this point, when in many countries people are undermining, by means of

unjust laws and customs, the natural foundations of the family. A few weeks back, I had the joy of meeting in Rome with a large group of married couples who were taking part in an International Conference on the Family. Following the teachings of the Church's Magisterium, I encouraged them to continue strengthening, by their words and their lives, the roots of the institution of the family, which is "a necessary good for peoples, an indispensable foundation for society and a great and lifelong treasure for couples."[9]

The family is rightfully called the *domestic church*, "because the family manifests and lives out the communal and familial nature of the Church as the family of God. Each family member, in accord with their own role, exercises the baptismal priesthood and contributes toward making the family a community of

grace and of prayer, a school of human and Christian virtue and the place where the faith is first proclaimed to children.”[10]

An essential characteristic of this institution, as a community founded and built on love—a disinterested self-giving to others—is that its members are called to spend themselves daily in an effective and affectionate concern for one another. No one there can act as if the others did not exist; each has to be concerned about the needs of the others: praying for one another, helping one another, suffering and rejoicing over the sorrows and joys of the others. Thus all will contribute to carrying out the most sweet precept, which brings with it Christian fraternity, a sowing of peace and joy that necessarily ends up influencing society.

The duty to “build up the family” in each home is something very pleasing, which falls on everyone: the father and mother, the brothers and sisters, the grandparents, anyone who contributes with their work to the care of the home. It is a task that affects everyone, because all of us have to fight against a “spoiled child” mentality, a clear manifestation of self-centeredness. Logically, this duty especially binds the parents, who have to direct their entire life, before other noble goals, to modeling their own family, as perfectly as possible, on the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph. Although some disagreements will inevitably occur, Christian spouses have to make an effort to overcome them quickly, asking for and granting forgiveness.

St. Josemaría understood and excused those weaknesses: “since we are human beings, sometimes it’s okay to argue; but not a lot. And

afterwards, both of you have to recognize that you are at fault, and tell each other, “Forgive me!” And give each other a big hug, and then, keep going! But make it clear that you are not going to have any more fights for a long time. And never argue in front of the children, whether they are young or older. Even when very small, children notice everything.”[11]

This marvelous panorama, daughters and sons of mine who are living your divine vocation within marriage, is also seen in sacrifices that are generally small, although at times they may seem great to you. The responsibility of bringing forward the home falls integrally on the father and mother, in every area. Perhaps one of the spouses, because of work demands, spends most of their time outside the home; but on returning home, after a day of hard, and even exhausting, work, one

cannot dispense oneself from striving to make the life of the other family members pleasant, or dedicate oneself to thinking selfishly about one's own relaxation. You have to give your spouse the affection and attention to which they have a right, and your children—especially in crucial periods of their physical and emotional development—the time and affection that they need.

Therefore, my daughters and sons who are married, examine your behavior at home. Think about how you can help out more in the tasks at home (which also fall to the men). Consider whether you speak calmly amongst yourselves about each of your children, so as to guide them by common agreement, and whether you are ready, when necessary, to cut back in your activity outside the home, in order to take better care of your family, which is always, as St. Josemaría insisted, the “best

business.” Especially, when the children are very young, help the other spouse to fulfill their Christian duties, such as attending Holy Mass or the means of Christian formation. Seek out the opportune means, certain that your effort and sacrifice will redound to the good of the whole family.

In the preceding paragraphs I have spoken more specifically to married people, but I want to stress that these duties and the main points of these counsels can apply to everyone, for we are all responsible—each in his or her own personal circumstances—for creating and maintaining around us a true family atmosphere. How do you pour yourself out for the others? What interest do you show in bringing peace and joy to the others? How do you show your availability for whatever needs to be done at home? At the office, in the workshop, during moments of relaxation, how

do you foster fraternity, the environment of a home?

As I write these lines, I am also thinking in a very special way of the Administration of our Centers.

Precisely because you carry out work very similar to that of our Lady in the home of Nazareth, how greatly you can influence, my daughters, the good of each person, each Center, each apostolic endeavor, the entire Work, all of society, by your hidden and silent service that creates the savor of a Christian family!

With regard to this marvelous family that is the Work, I have given thanks to God for two recent experiences. Fifteen days ago in Milan; and the day before yesterday when I returned from Berlin. These two stays brought to mind many recollections of the life of St. Josemaría, who wants each and

every one of us to “build up the family” at every moment.

Let us go frequently to the Mother of the Church and the Work, asking her to teach us to spread the ideals of the Christian family everywhere, with its various practical, and necessary, consequences. If this should ever entail sacrifice, let us not forget that it is also an inexhaustible source of joy: the joy of those who don't think about themselves but who give themselves in generous dedication to the others, for God, as Jesus did.

Continue to pray a lot for my intentions. God willed that I be the Father of this supernatural family of the Work. I, alone, cannot do anything; supported by my daughters and sons, with God's grace, I can do everything: “*omnia possum in eo, qui me confortat.*”[12]

And pray more, much more, for Benedict XVI, the common Father of

Catholics, the Vicar of Christ in this great family of God on earth, which the Holy Church is.

With all my affection, I bless you,

Your Father,

+ Javier

[1] *Acts* 2:42.

[2] *Acts* 4:32.

[3] *Acts* 4:31,33.

[4] *Mt* 12:49-50;

[5] *The Life of Mary*, attributed to St. Maximus the Confessor, no. 95 (*Testimariani del primo millennio*, vol. II, p. 259).

[6] St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 139.

[7] *Ibid.* [8] Pope Benedict XVI, *Address at the World Meeting of Families*, July 8, 2006.

[9] *Ibid.* [10] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, “Compendium,” no. 350.

[11] St. Josemaría, Notes taken in a get-together, June 4, 1974 (*Hogares luminosos y alegres*, p. 26).

[12] *Phil* 4:13.

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